



# **The Blind Masseuse: A Traveler's Memoir from Costa Rica to Cambodia**

*Alden Jones*

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## **The Blind Masseuse: A Traveler's Memoir from Costa Rica to Cambodia** Alden Jones

Through personal journeys both interior and across the globe, Alden Jones investigates what motivates us to travel abroad in search of the unfamiliar. By way of explorations to Costa Rica, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Cuba, Burma, Cambodia, Egypt, and around the world on a ship, Jones chronicles her experience as a young American traveler while pondering her role as an outsider in the cultures she temporarily inhabits. Her wanderlust fuels a strong, high-adventure story and, much in the vein of classic travel literature, Jones's picaresque tale of personal evolution informs her own transitions, rites of passage, and understandings of her place as a citizen of the world. With sharp insight and stylish prose, Jones asks: Is there a *right* or *wrong* way to travel? *The Blind Masseuse* concludes that there is, but that it's not always black and white.

Gold Winner for Travel Essays, *Foreword* Books of the Year

Gold Medal for Travel Essays, Independent Publisher Book Awards

Winner, Bisexual Book Awards, Bisexual Biography/Memoir Category

Finalist, Housatonic Book Awards

Longlist of eight, PEN/Diamonstein Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay

Finalist, Travel Book or Guide Award, North American Travel Journalists Association

## **The Blind Masseuse: A Traveler's Memoir from Costa Rica to Cambodia Details**

Date : Published November 15th 2013 by University of Wisconsin Press (first published October 22nd 2013)

ISBN : 9780299295707

Author : Alden Jones

Format : Hardcover 192 pages

Genre : Travel, Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir



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## From Reader Review The Blind Masseuse: A Traveler's Memoir from Costa Rica to Cambodia for online ebook

### Irina says

For an actual traveler, this book has little to offer. There is nothing new, unusual or eye-opening. Right at the intro the author points out the distinction between a "traveler" and a "tourist" - which to me is already quite a bit snobby. So you would think she wouldn't act as a tourist in the book, yet the majority of her experiences are of a tourist.

I suspect the author just took a bunch of travel blog entries and turned them into a book. Not to say this can't be done, but if I spend my time with a book, I expect it to be better quality than just a blog. This one wasn't.

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### Randi says

It is a rare book indeed that not only energizes readers into immediately packing suitcases for lands unknown, but also requires us to ask the deeper questions, as Jones does here: Is there "something suspicious about my desire to briefly inhabit other cultures?" Similar to Paul Bowles and Sybille Bedford, Jones poses to herself, and to us, the iceberg question: "Is there a right way and a wrong way to travel?"

Handling an exploration into the realm of exoticism is akin to walking on a wavering bamboo bridge across a roaring gorge. On the one hand there is our desire as travelers to traverse the unknown; on the other, a realization that by doing so we are indeed making it less so. Or as Jones, who plays wonderfully with words in this terrific collection of essays, puts it: "The exoticist chases this feeling: the sense you are part of the very thing that once excited you for its inaccessibility. After Spain I sought out new foreign charms. But I wanted an experience that was more foreign[italics]. The charm of the unfamiliar need not always involve glamour; it might be the shock of the unfamiliar, even a scandalized reaction to the unfamiliar."

And the unfamiliar is what Jones gives us. Whether it is her quiet description of the bijou moment when she waits out a rainstorm under the palace roof in Cambodia with two monks and all three of them have finally run out of things to say and they "stood there close together breathing in the wet air," or when she takes on the secretive Cuban participation in the Angola war, not writ large, but from the unrelenting lens of her dear tour guide, eventual friend, Darwin, who was permitted to leave Cuba only once, to fight in that war, Jones captivates us with the joys of traveling but also the searing knowledge of what we learn as travelers--not tourists--about the cultures and the land, yes, but more movingly and unforgettably, about the people themselves. Jones never flinches either as she turns her camera on herself, including one of those "scandalous reaction" scenes where caught up with taking a photograph of three naked boys, she races after them as they try to get away, and when they finally stop, continues to snap her photos.

But this collection is far from all sturm und drang. In addition to her terrific storytelling, Jones has a wicked sense of humor, which she is more than likely to turn on herself, always the sign of a reliable narrator. Whether she is making fun of her addiction to "the hobble-skirt bottle[d]" Coke while in Bolivia, or her shop-till-you-drop scenes in local Southeast Asian markets, all of it is part of her self-exploration of what it means to be a traveler. To be or not to be an exoticist. That is the question. This book makes us ask ourselves that as we pack our next suitcase. It's a great question and a great book that encourages us to ask that.

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### **Bryanna Plog says**

4.5 stars: a thoroughly enjoyable read. Alden Jones takes the reader around the world, and while visiting the different destinations is part of the fun of reading this book, what makes THE BLIND MASSEUSE stand out from other travelogues is how Jones takes the reader through her own struggles and thoughts on what traveling means in today's world, especially for women. In different situations she is both a traveler and a tourist and I enjoyed her thoughts and honesty on what that means. Her strong, easy-going writing style and memorable characters are the highlights. More a memoir of Jones' reflections and growth than a book about a place (which is why I finally rated it 4 not 5 stars...personal preference), I highly recommend THE BLIND MASSEUSE to anyone who travels or thinks about traveling and the world we live in.

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### **Carrianne K.Y. Leung says**

I loved being carried away with Jones on her journeys. She is a master storyteller, bringing an attentive and compassionate sensibility to the places and people she meets. This is a wonderful book for anyone who has ever had the desire to step outside and engage in the world with ethical curiosity and wonder. Part of the journey is the return, and Jones gives us the opportunity to come full circle with an understanding that we are never in the same place again.

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### **Kristianne says**

We often want to encourage folks to try different perspectives on for size, but handing your reader a strict set of rules that outline success and failure at being a good person is not, perhaps the best technique. Jones frequently emphasizes that she is a TRAVELER not a TOURIST. She is so intrinsically, at her core, a TRAVELER she doesn't even need to try. She gladly embraces the pain of being pelted by gravel by angry folks in Bolivia, for example, because she knows she ought to take these sorts of punishments for the privilege of her birthplace. She does try slumming as a mere tourist a few times in the book and feels dirty and somehow morally better for attempting it and feeling wrong about it. She wants to make people more responsible while traveling. That is a great motivation that many of us support. But Jones' prescription for how it's done seems simply to just hope to be her.

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### **Kelly Campbell says**

A beautifully written memoir that explores much more than even the exotic locations she visits, like Costa Rica, Cuba and Cambodia. Alden Jones gives us clever and delightful insights about culture, travel, love and life, allowing readers to experience the thrill of being a true and courageous traveler, great for those reluctant to travel much further than getting off the couch.... But don't read it because it's wonderful travel writing; read it because it's a fun, entertaining and beautiful journey.

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### **Jennifer Chow says**

This is an interesting read that explores one writer's journey across different countries. I love how Jones brings up the discussion of being a traveler versus a tourist, and her difficulty in juggling those two mindsets. However, since she introduced that there is a "right" way to travel from early on, I thought she would have had a more conclusive ending to her memoir.

I also thought that Jones brought to light some interesting facts and cultural experiences, particularly with the Latin countries. There were some aspects I wished she explored more, though--just like there are probably sights within countries that I would want to visit if I were actually going in person. Through her lens, though, I only got to experience a country in very customized chunks. I did like the memoir portion, though, and how Jone reveals her own thinking and growth throughout her travels.

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### **Cassie says**

3.5 perhaps

I really enjoyed reading this. Occasionally I have a need to travel vicariously and this book provided that. I also enjoyed Jones' observations both on those she encountered and her own life. I also appreciate the ability to observe her travels and consider what I would do differently.

This book will not teach you what to expect when you travel or give a clear image of the places Jones visited. But you will gain details from a traveler's journey and a glimpse of all that she saw, honest conversations held, and moments she experienced (including internal struggles of one who wants to connect *and* observe. It's worth reading.

(I will also admit that I have read very few travel memoirs at this point.)

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### **Jennie Wood says**

I love the way this book isn't just about the author's external travels, but also about the inner growth she experiences while visiting new countries and cultures. By sharing her own honest, personal thoughts and feelings, Jones captures the inner struggles and conflicts that come up for all of us when we travel to new places. In fact, she captures these inner conflicts on a philosophical and analytical level that I have never encountered before in a travelogue or memoir. The conflicts and questions she raises while traveling - that inner, emotional landscape - stayed with me long after I finished the book. It's a powerful book that manages to be funny, smart, AND emotionally satisfying.

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### **Christy says**

The title is only related to the subject matter of the book in the briefest of ways. The essay about the blind massuer shoehorns the feminine version of the title into the conversation of the book and makes for an odd title considering its tangential nature. I liked the first half of the book much better than the last. The last few

chapters were packed, rushed, and largely authorcentric.

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## Queer-O-Meter says

Mar reviews *The Blind Masseuse* by Alden Jones.

Alden Jones the Tourist is dying for a Coca-Cola while Alden Jones the Traveler is rejecting such a desire on principle. This is the premise of the third story in Alden Jones's travel memoir, *The Blind Masseuse*. With hilarity and great introspection, this memoir tells of Jones's travels to countries including Costa Rica, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Cambodia, and Burma. However, rather than telling tales of wrestling crocodiles or riding elephants, Jones dives into the cultural implications of traveling especially as an educated white woman from New Jersey. Throughout the book, Jones is conflicted between giving into the side of her who wants to enjoy the luxury she can afford and falling into the trap of turning a blind eye to her privilege. She deliberates the subtleties between the two roles—how the Traveler in her thinks critically about the role her background plays in the way she views a foreign country while the Tourist in her falls into traps of exoticizing the places she travels to.

Just a heads up: Mar is hella biased because Alden was her thesis advisor.

Despite what the title might leave you to believe, this book ignites a desire to analyze one's own views of other cultures. In fact, after reading the book the title resonates in a deeper sense than relating to the section where Jones tells of a massage she received from a blind man in Costa Rica. Jones herself acts as a masseuse to the places she explores, trying to dig into the depths and nuances of these cultures. She works to be blind of her biases and the privilege she comes from while also trying to sustain consciousness of the aspects of life in these countries that the Tourist side of her would overlook.

Have no fear, dear friends. This gets gay.

Towards the middle of the book (page 81 to be specific), ladies and gents and beautiful blobs of nonbinary genders, is where the gay comes in. \*rubs hands together and laughs maniacally\*

“Why not fall in love with someone terrified of attachment, socially incompatible with me, and very, very young? Maybe—I don’t know—a girl? That would certainly slow my progress toward a conventional adulthood.

That was what I did.”

I just want to pause and remind you that this is a work of nonfiction and therefore does not stoop to using harmful tropes like *Burying Your Gay* or the *Lesbian Death Syndrome*. On the contrary, one story in this memoir tells the story of how she met her wife. And it will have you squeaking from cuteness overload.

Jones does not claim a label for her sexual orientation, a decision I am certain was deliberate. And this book is a perfect example to shove in the face of cishets when they ask, “Why does everything have to be about being gay?” This book isn’t. It isn’t a tale of the struggle of discovering one’s queerness or coming out. It is an exploration of self and the world, particularly the relationship between the two.

*The Blind Masseuse* was named a Top Ten Travel Book by Publishers Weekly and her collection of short

stories titled *Unaccompanied Minors* was a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award. She currently teaches at Emerson College in Boston, MA and is the cofounder of the Cuba Writers Program.

Pros: quick read (180 pages), insights into the effect privilege has on traveling, happy ending!!!

Cons: only 180 pages, ????

5/5 unicorns

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### **sarah morgan says**

Are you a traveler or a tourist? Do you seek out the exotic or search for all the comforts of home in your travels? Those are some of the philosophical and practical questions that percolate up through the pages of this wonderful travel memoir.

A new generation of traveler, Alden Jones learned to balance her desire for distant places with the reality of making a living. The memoir follows her travels around the globe from WorldTeach volunteer, right out of college, to full-fledged professor of English and cultural studies.

Witty and wise, she kept me entertained and curious about life in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Cuba, and then on to Asia—Burma, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The section on Cambodia is particularly well done, and no one should miss her open letter to Gustav Flaubert about his exploits in Egypt. It's a knockout.

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### **Booktart says**

One of the better travel books I've read recently. Similar to others in the sense that it is written by someone from a privileged background, but Jones is at least very aware of this and reflects on some of her own questionable actions (like taking pictures without the consent of others) as a traveler. Throughout the book, she weaves in discussions of being a tourist versus a traveler. Ultimately, it's difficult for anyone from her background ( and that of many Americans) to become completely of another culture. Interesting and thought provoking reflections. Also very well written.

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### **B says**

The Blind Masseuse is a well-crafted travel memoir, but the book is also a deeper reflection on culture, travel, and tourism, and how those concepts intersect and conflict. (But that somewhat scientific explanation of the book's themes hardly do it justice.)

One of my favorite quotes comes early on in the book and set the tone as I hurried through the pages: "While tourists spend their time away from home seeking out the comforts of home, travelers risk - even cultivate - discomfort, because what they want is the thrill of a new perspective."

That sentence stopped me in my tracks: Am I a tourist? Or am I a traveler?

As I followed Jones' trips around the world, which she admittedly makes both as a traveler and as a tourist, I kept returning to that question. And perhaps that's why the book was so compelling. Certainly Jones' writing style is engaging, and her travel adventures are at times humorous and at times poignant, but what sets this book apart from other travel memoirs is that it kept me thinking not only about the adventures of the narrator, but also about the larger context in which we explore our world (and in which I explore the world).

(Note: And I'm not raving about the book because I received a pre-release copy. I've received many free books over the years, and if they're horrible, I either don't post a review or I tell it straight that the book was no good. This book was truly good.)

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### **Jennifer Turnbull says**

I was lucky enough to be able to get my hands on this book pre-release. If you love to read travel books, this one is not to be missed. It's a travel memoir in the typical sense in that it shares the author's travels around the world. What makes it unique though is the author's approach to new cultures. She wants to fit in, in Costa Rica, in Bolivia, in Cuba, and constantly fights the urge to travel like a tourist who judges a culture rather than embraces it. Although this book explores weighty topics like exoticism and the philosophy of travel, it is a fun, easy read.

For my full interview with the author, check out my blog: <http://www.twoweeksincostarica.com/1/...>

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